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Report Highlights:

Bread for Breakfast, Curry on Rice for Dinner (results of a recent survey of youth attitudes toward food); A Burger with What? (regional hamburger shops break some interesting new ground); The Colonel is a Tigers Fan (the Hanshin Tigers baseball team may have a new American player)

Note: This report will be sent to interested U.S. trade groups, U.S. legislators and State Departments of Agriculture.

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JAPAN FOOD TRENDS

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Recent Trends and Developments of Interest

1. *Bread for Breakfast, Curry on Rice for Dinner*

What do young people in Japan today eat, and what do they think about food?

These and many other food-related questions — covering everything from how often young women living alone visit convenience stores (3.3 times per week) to how many hold chopsticks the ‘proper’ way (74.8%)* — were answered in a recently-released survey by the Norinchukin Bank, which is supported by the major national agricultural cooperatives.



The undisputed favorite.

(Photo: from the blog “Jaburo no Kaze no Uwasa”)

400 unmarried men and women in their 20s, residing between 20 to 50 kilometers of central Tokyo, were surveyed in late January and early February of this year. 161 respondents (40%) said that they lived by themselves, while the rest continue to live with their parents.

On average, those surveyed said that they eat breakfast 4.7 times per week, with “not enough time” (76.9%) given as the most common reason for missing the first meal of the day. Exactly half of the women (50.0%) eat breakfast “every day”, while only about one third (37.5%) of the men said that they do.

When they do eat in the mornings, the vast majority (89.5%) dine at home on bread (72.7%). Compared with the much smaller number who eat rice (44.9%), it is easy to see why the Japanese government feels nervous enough about rice consumption to spend money on a national advertising campaign — including television commercials and a catchy song — promoting the eating of rice for breakfast (“Eat rice before 9am and you’ll be on the ball all day!”):

<http://www.maff.go.jp/j/soushoku/kakou/mezamas.html>

It is also easy to see that the government faces an uphill battle, given that a great deal of convincing will have to be done to even get young people to eat breakfast, let alone go through the trouble of washing rice, putting it into the cooker, and preparing

condiments or side dishes that typically accompany steamed rice. By comparison, bread can be consumed quickly and in a much wider variety of forms, from sliced loaves (usually eaten as in America, toasted and spread with jam, margarine, or some other topping such as sliced cheese) to dozens of types of packaged sweet and savory rolls and Danishes that are available in convenience stores, train station kiosks, supermarkets, and elsewhere.

Rather large differences between men and women are apparent in many of the survey results. For example while about half of the men living alone cook for themselves (50.5%) a much larger number of the women do (82.4%). In terms of attitudes, men living alone mainly pay attention to the cost of the food they buy (31.2%) while for women the main concern expressed was safety (44.1%). Even more stark, for those living with their families, most of the men said that they effectively never even help with cooking (73.8%) while nearly all of the women usually help to some extent (80.5%).

When cooking dinner for themselves, both men and women agreed on the top menu item and undisputed king of the Japanese evening repast: curry with rice (or simply “curry-rice” in Japanese parlance). This was followed by pasta or spaghetti, stir-fried vegetables (which generally includes some pork), fried rice, and salads.

Attitudes toward imports and biotech foods are apparent in a number of the survey data. For example only about one tenth of the respondents indicated that vegetables from China and GM products could be considered “okay” for consumption. As for U.S. beef, two-thirds of the men expressed a favorable opinion toward consumption (66.0%) while only somewhat more than one-third of the women (35.0%) answered likewise.

Extensive survey results (in Japanese) can be found at:

http://www.nochubank.or.jp/pdf_news/n_20080319150701.pdf

2. A Burger with What?

Japanese love hamburgers. They also love unusual, regional flavors —and they love to experiment.

So along with the major U.S. burger franchises and some established domestic chains, it is not unusual these days to stumble upon gourmet burger shops offering big, flavorful sandwiches at somewhat elevated prices. A few of these, such as Freshness Burger (<http://www.freshnessburger.co.jp/>) and Sasebo Burger (<http://sasebo-burger.jp/>) have even expanded and are beginning to become well known chains in their own right.

But around the country you can still find a lot of original burger-thinking going on, and one recent example is the Mojiko Retro Burger available only

The line-inducing Mojiko Retro Burger.

(Photo: courtesy Asahi Shimbun)



in the tourist-oriented Moji Ward of the southern city of Kitakyushu. (This area of the city features many restored, historic structures, hence the use of the word “Retro”. For more information see: <http://www.retro-mojiko.jp/english/index.html>)

What makes these burgers special is not only the use of locally-produced and rather rare Kokura beef, but also the inclusion of finely diced meat taken from the waters of the nearby Kammon Straight: meat from octopus, that is. A special sauce based on Suntory’s venerable Akadama port wine adds to the ‘retro’ flavor mix of these roughly \$4.00 burgers.

Octopus? Perhaps not quite something that would appeal to American palates, but from sushi to side dishes to Osaka’s famous *takoyaki* (grilled octopus balls), it is not necessarily an unusual ingredient in Japan.

Still its use in hamburgers is fresh enough that at its first introduction at the end of April, lines quickly formed. According to the *Asahi Shimbun*, satisfied customers commented on the juiciness of the meat patties and their surprisingly lively texture.

The trend of unusual local burger developments shows no sign of slowing.

3. *The Colonel is a Tigers Fan*

For decades life-sized, plaster statues of Colonel Sanders have been a common and well-loved fixture in front of many Japanese KFC outlets.

Though unfamiliar in the United States, the figures (which stand on concrete bases and are a good head taller than most Japanese) project a friendly, welcoming image—even if the Colonel’s pose, with both arms bent and sort of half outstretched, seems ambiguous. (Does he want a hug, or is he carrying a phantom bucket of Extra Crispy?)

With identical statues on display everywhere, it has become customary for franchises near popular tourist destinations to add some regional color to their Colonels. For example the restaurant in the middle of Shin Kyogoku (Kyoto’s busiest gift shop arcade) often sports a tradition-inspired accessory, such as a *happi* (half coat) in the *Shinsengumi* style.[†] Hence it is not uncommon to find Colonels near baseball stadiums donning team hats or scarves as they greet fans.

But mere accessorizing wasn’t enough for the KFC manager at the legendary Koshien Stadium outside of Kobe. The start of the baseball season this year was marked by the debut of what appears to be a new team member for the beloved Hanshin Tigers: the Colonel, number 1970 (for the year KFC opened its first restaurant in Japan), in a roughly \$1,000, custom-tailored uniform. On the back across his shoulders is written simply “Colonel”—as he is affectionately known in Japan.



In full Tigers regalia.
(Photo: courtesy *Asahi Shimbun*)

*According to Japanese custom, there are 'proper' and 'improper' ways of using chopsticks. The proper method, as often demonstrated on paper chopstick sleeves in restaurants, involves holding one stick stationary between the base of the thumb and fourth finger, while the other stick is moved by the tip of the thumb and the index and middle fingers. One common improper style is known as the 'X method', because the sticks are manipulated in a scissors-like fashion. For tips, see:

<http://www.wikihow.com/Eat-With-Chopsticks>

†The *Shinsengumi* were a paramilitary police force in Kyoto at the end of the feudal period in the late 19th Century. They were well known for their distinctive garb and youthful flair, and are often the subject of historical dramas. For more information see:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinsengumi>